

Questions about *In the Company of Whispers*

Q. In the Company of Whispers plays with time and memory in surprising ways. What brought you to write the book in this fashion.

A. I spent part of my childhood in Rangoon, Burma and it has haunted my life ever since, so it was inevitable that I would write about it. As I wrote *In the Company of Whispers*, my time in Burma as a child blended with the present and my fascination with projecting the future. As the book reached backward and forward into my life, I found myself weaving artifacts from my past into that future. The final result is a novel in which letters, photographs, and narrative form an almost three dimensional setting inside its covers.

Q. The elements of memoir make this a deeply personal story. How is Susie/Susannah/Granna based on Sallie?

A. The stories that Granna tells of her childhood in Burma are my childhood memories from when we lived there. The letters in the book are the letters my mother, my father, and I wrote home while we were there. The stories that Granna tells are from real experiences. Granna's past is the memoir and autobiographical part of the book, while the Granna of 2047 exists only in my imagination

Q. Do you think that form follows function in this book? In The Company of Whispers we have letters from the past juxtaposed against governmental decrees set in 2047, all set against Zeyya's narratives and dreams, and the whole punctuated by visual artifacts from mid 20th century Burma. How and why did you set the book up this way?

A. "Y jgp"tgcfgtu"Łtuv"nqqm"cv"vjg"rcigu"qh"*In The Company of Whispers*"vjg{"oc{"dg"uwtrtkugf"vq"Łpf"fkhgtgpv"vkog"htcogu"lwzvcrcugf"ci ckpuv"gej"qvjgt"kp"vjg"hcujkqp"vjg{"ctg."dwv"vjku"ku"jqy"rgqrng"nkxg< qwt"rtgugpv"ku"ı ggvkpi"cpf"yg"ctg"Łmgf"ykvj"kfgeu"cdqwy"qwt"hwwtg."cpf" {gv."kv"ku"qwt"rcuv"vjcv"hggu"qwt"oqxgogpv"kpqv"vjg"hwwtg0"Vjg"ngvgtu" and photographs are physical proof to the reader that the things Granna shares with Zeyya and Jonah are real, that her memories are not just the wanderings of an old lady's mind. They are what make both 2047 and 1958 tangible to the reader.

They also change the way the book is read. *In the Company of Whispers* is both visually and functionally surprising. K"co"tqqvgf"kp"xkuwcn"ctv0"K"ugg"vjg"ctv"cpf"vjg"fguki p"qh"vjg"dqqm"y jkng"K"y tkvg"kv0"Uq"pq"dqqm"qh"o kpg"ku"Łpkujgf"wpvkn" it has been illustrated and laid out and typeset, and because the art and words are one with each other, the form and the function are always blended, but in this book, they are actually embedded into each other.

Q. There are many unusual names and original uses of words in the book. What are their significance?

A. I collect old dictionaries and thesauruses, because I love how language changes. Which means, that the language of the future will be different from the language we use now. So I invented words like “hung” for sex, “hanging” for dating, and Netcasters in place of newscasters.

For me, the most interesting linguistic invention in the book is the word/name *Jo-Boys* as a replacement for the word *dogs*, because it so speaks to Jonah’s otherness. Names are important. They have connotations associated with them. I chose *Granna* because I want her to be more than just Granny or Grandmother or Grandmom—she had to be a specific grandmother. And, for people who want to know what happens to the characters after the book ends, I can only say that *Zeyya* means *success* in Burmese.

Q. What purpose does Jonah serve in the story?

A. Jonah is—in addition to being genuinely mysterious, possibly alien, and unexpectedly romantic—Jonah is also, quite literally, the physical embodiment of memory, past and future. His presence breaches the isolation that Zeyya and Granna are experiencing as Granna grows older, as Zeyya loses her parents and as the future looks bleak. He is the icon of the importance of human connection, of human memory, of history, story and family.

Q. Do you listen to music as you write? Can you tell us more about Zeyya’s concerto, “Ethan?”

A. For me, words and language and the rhythm of writing make their own music. Zeyya’s concerto, *Ehan*, is her way of protesting, of expressing her anguish over the world and the people she loses. It’s a swelling up, a howl against the injustice she sees and hears, expressed through the beauty and power of music. The unfinished concerto is the one personal item she has when her parents are Quarantined, and finishing it is what impels her into her future and becomes the raw affirmation of her identity.

Q. What are the most significant ways Burma changed your life?

A. Burma changed me in so many ways, I can’t separate myself from it. I never felt totally American again because I had seen that reality was subjective—that people didn’t all believe in the same way or believe the same things. Who is to say that the Burmese aren’t right about reincarnation? They believe in it as strongly as the most religious Christian, Jew or Muslim views their beliefs about death and life. In Burma, everything we took for granted—dominant religion, pasteurized milk, drinkable water from the tap, hot water in the bathrooms, grocery stores, the iconic and always available hamburger and French fries—everything was turned upside down. We didn’t have TV or radio, we didn’t have many movies, we couldn’t buy parts to the luxury items we had come with, like a 1958 Chevy, or two window unit air conditioners, but we were happy. We didn’t need every luxury and gadget and piece of technology to have a rich life. We found it in our imaginations, in the visual landscape of a different world, in new friends from faraway places; in celebrating Buddhist and Hindi, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, Chinese, Burmese, Indian and Israeli holidays—so many in fact I was rarely in school. But I got a different kind of education—experiential and vital. I became acutely aware that the one thing that is universal worldwide is that everyone creates art and music, dance and literature, and that within the arts, the breadth of creation is endless, forming a universe of expression that speaks across boundaries of language, culture and political belief. Burma taught me that possibilities are endless and gave me an insatiable craving for otherness that drives me to write stories and make art and create, and hence to lead a happy and rich life.

Q. How would you suggest teachers and librarians use *In the Company of Whispers* with teen readers?

LETTERS/PRIMARY DOCUMENTS: The written word transcends time and distance. Letters are a primary source of information, a direct way to connect to the past.

1. What do the letters in the book tell you about the Americans living in Rangoon in the late 1950's? What information about the differences in cultural beliefs do you get from the letters?
2. Compare these letters to letters from people in other periods of history. What do letters as primary documents teach us and offer us?
3. In the past, the written word, including letters, has transcended time. What is the effect of email, text messaging and instant messaging going to have on the study of history and culture?

STORY/CREATIVE EXTENSIONS: Stories and memory are major universal themes in this book. Storytelling and sharing of family story is an important part of finding identity and is a place that we can reach back to for security and also creativity.

1. Everything we own whispers to us. Choose an item to bring in and talk about whispers to you. Use those whispers to write a story about the effect of that object on someone in the future.
2. *In the Company of Whispers* closely examines several different cultural viewpoints and how they change who we are. Create a viable alien, considering its biology, the culture that would develop from that biology, what kind of artifacts it would create, where it would find food, what kind of terrain would it live in and how would it view life and death? What would be important to it and why? How would it leave its own whispers behind?

BURMA: We usually view this country in the context of WWII, if we think about it at all, although recently it has been made the news headlines as a violently repressed nation.

1. Look up recent current events articles and examine how the country has changed, as presented in the book, from the late 1950's until now. Compare this to how the US has changed from the late 1950's to now.
2. Discuss how differences in cultural viewpoints cause miscommunications in the book. In the world today.

FREEDOM: There are two kinds of freedom: internal freedom to think and create; and political freedom which is determined by environment and societal values. Both need to be constantly reexamined, treasured and guarded.

1. Freedom can slip away easily, without anyone noticing. Totalitarianism can seep in while people try to solve political, health or social problems. Identify from the clues in the book how this has happened in 2047. Take into consideration environmental changes, population issues, health issues.
2. How has the internet affected society in the book? How does Zeyya change when she no longer has access to the internet? Are these positive or negative effects?
3. The threat of quarantine creates a foundation of fear in *In the Company of Whispers* which Granna, Zeyya and the larger community live under on a daily basis. How does this fear affect political and personal freedom
4. What ways does Granna's non-conformity protect her and offer her more freedom than most inhabitants of the Greater East Coast Metropolis have.

ENVIRONMENT: In the background of the book lurk changes in the environment that are putting stress on communities causing social and political changes.

1. What do you think will happen if global warming causes this kind of upheaval in our lifetimes? What kinds of options do we have, personally and politically, to try to influence the course of this issue?
2. What will happen to our social institutions if cities such as Bombay, NY, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Tokyo, with populations in the hundreds of millions, are under water in the next 40 to 100 years?